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Local Newspaper Agenda-Setting as Reflected in Letters to the Editor

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Local Newspaper Agenda-Setting as Reflected in Letters to the Editor

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BY

Thomas J. McDonnell

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Running Head: LOCAL NEWSPAPER AGENDA-SETTING

Local Newspaper Agenda-Setting as Reflected in Letters to the Editor

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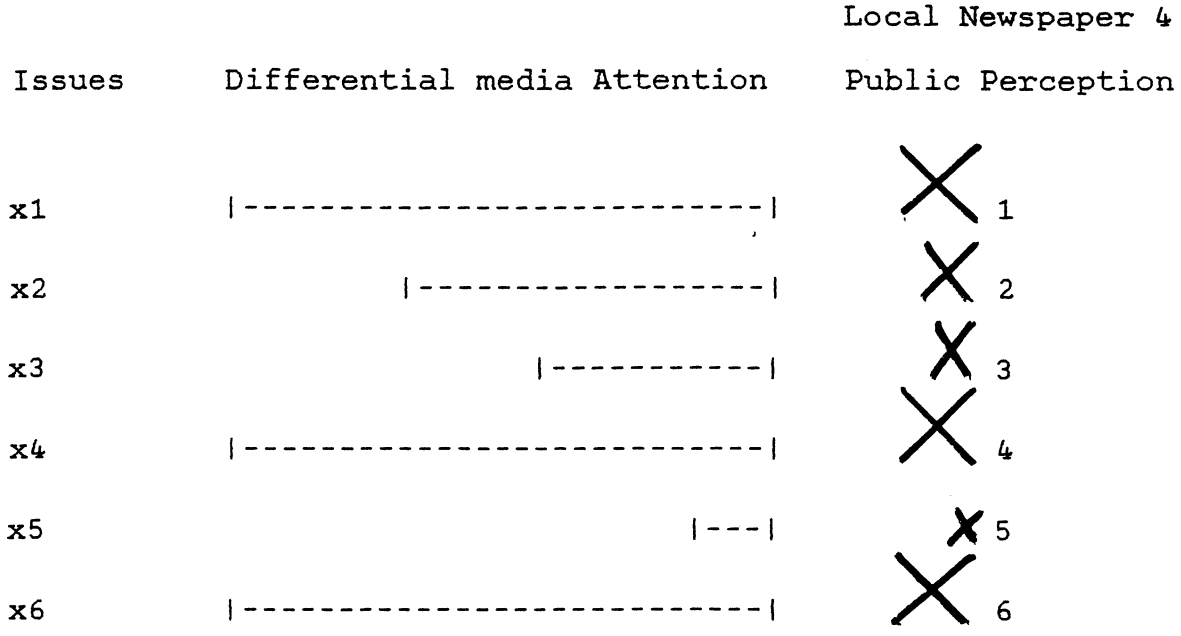
Abstract

In an effort to test the basic agenda-setting theory, a content analysis of three small to mid-size Illinois newspapers was done to determine what correlation, if any, existed between the content of the front page and the issues addressed in the letters to the editor section. Pearson product moment correlations were calculated for all issues addressed by the papers and the public. No support was found for basic agenda-setting in this study. There was partial support the hypothesis that local newspapers would be more effective setting the local issue agenda.

Annoy the media and re-elect the president. The implications of that statement, made in the 1992 campaign by then President George Bush, appear to suggest that the news media has the power to dictate public opinion. Can, for example, a newspaper's editorial stance on an issue directly impact on the public's attitude toward that issue or are there other factors that play equally important roles? This paper will explore how researchers have attempted to answer that question.

One theory that attempts to answer this question directly is the theory of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting is simply defined as the mass media's ability to affect public opinion, based on the amount of coverage it gives an issue. Essentially, the agenda-setting theory posits that the more the media covers an issue, the more important the public thinks it is. McCombs and Shaw (1976) write that "audiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place on it" (McQuail and Windahl, 1993).

The basic agenda-setting model is shown on the following page:



The issues at the left side of the model are all equal at first, but based on the amount of coverage the media gives these issues, the public places differing amounts of importance on them. The "X's" on the left side of the model represent issues prior to media coverage. The bars, in the middle of the model, represent the differing amounts of coverage the media might give to these issues. Finally the "X's" on the right side of the model represent how the public perceives these issues as a result of the media coverage. The greater the media coverage the more important the issue becomes to the public. Hence the wider the bars in the middle of the model, the larger the "X's" become.

Much of the agenda-setting research concerns itself with election campaigns. "The theory is if voters can be convinced that an issue is important, they will vote for the candidate or party projected as the most competent to deal

with it" (McQuail and Windahl, p.105). These types of agenda-setting effects are easily tested by doing a content analysis of media sources and opinion surveys at two or more points in time.

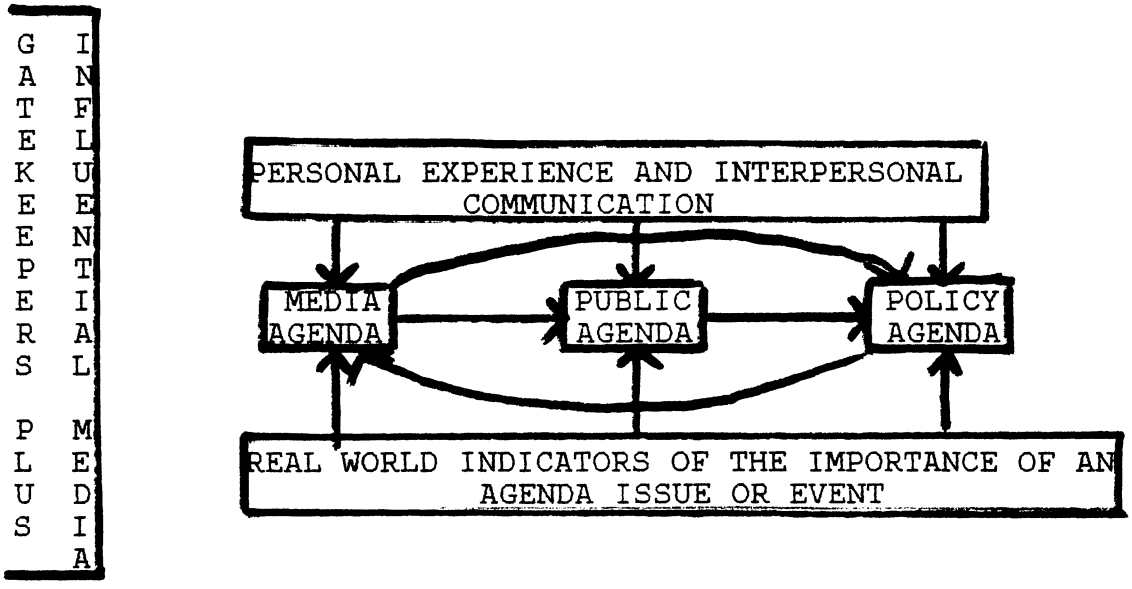
Scholars have also pointed to some difficulties with agenda-setting research. Research doesn't always address the role of interpersonal communication in agenda-setting. Another possibility is that the media acts as a carrier of the agenda that is created by the public and institutions. Another issue that arises questions whether the media intentionally is setting the agenda or merely responding to the public's agenda.

To address some of these questions, Rogers and Dearing (1987) proposed a differential model of agenda-setting. In this model Rogers and Dearing identify three types of agenda. Media agenda refers to the priorities of attention in media content to issues and events. The public agenda is defined as the varying salience in public opinion and knowledge. The policy agenda is the third type. It refers to the issue and policy proposals of politicians and other institutional representatives like corporations.

Rogers and Dearing found the following effects in their research. The mass media influences the public agenda by weight of coverage. The public agenda influences policy agenda as politicians respond to voters concerns. The media agenda also influences the policy agenda, as politicians use

the media as a guide to public opinion. The policy agenda also has an influence on the media agenda on some issues. Finally the media agenda is also influenced by real world events and many sources. Rogers, Dearing and Bregman (1993) suggest doing studies where some of these other types of agenda-setting are studied further.

Rogers and Dearing's (1987) model looks like this:



Even with this apparently comprehensive model, however, the ability to accurately predict agenda-setting is difficult. Scholars suggest the constant interaction of variables makes it difficult to assess the effects of the media. Other problems with the model include the media variance in credibility, media messages that don't share with the personal experience of the audience, and that people may hold different values about news events than the media does.

McCombs and Shaw (1993) outlined the history of agenda-setting research which began in 1972 with their own study. That first study advanced the basic agenda-setting model as described earlier. Other phases of research on agenda-setting are identified including contingent conditions on agenda-setting, and sources of media agenda.

McCombs and Shaw suggest that new research venues should look at the media ability not to just tell us what to think about but how to think about it. "The attributes of an issue emphasized in news coverage can, for example, directly influence the direction of public opinion" (p. 1963).

McCombs (1992) suggests that all four phases of agenda-setting research are still viable. Phase one research looks at the pattern of news coverage and its influence on public perception of the important issues of the day. The second phase looks at contingent conditions, i.e. how the media agenda combined with other factors such as issue salience or obtrusiveness correlates with the public agenda. The third phase studies candidate image and political interest as alternative agendas. The fourth phase looks at how the media sets its agenda. McCombs suggests agenda-setting "is about more than issue or object salience" (p. 820).

Kosicki (1993) discusses some of the problems and opportunities in agenda-setting research. He describes the various agenda-setting models as dealing mainly with the

salience of issues and that most often the public issues are constructed by the researcher. The problem, according to Kosicki, is that the issues constructed by the researcher are invariably non-controversial issues. The definition of an issue, as a "broad, content-free topic domain, devoid of controversy or contending forces" (Kosicki p. 104), was conceived by Rogers and Dearing and has been utilized by others. This can be a problem because little has been done on the effects of agenda-setting with controversial issues.

Kosicki identifies other problems with agenda-setting research. These include micro versus macro measurement. In other words, should a researcher study aggregate level media and aggregate level public opinion or individual to individual? Another problem is in the long versus short term measurement. Kosicki feels there is no clearly defined way to do short and long term studies of agenda-setting, because researchers haven't been able to sufficiently identify what is significant about the time variable.

Edelstein (1993) looks at the criterion variable in agenda-setting research. He believes researchers need to better define what is meant by "thinking about" when defining agenda-setting as the media's ability to tell people what to think about. He proposes a new criterion variable called the "problematic situation" which is defined as the "condition of discrepancy and the steps that are taken to address the discrepancy" (Edelstein, p. 86).

He identifies five kinds of discrepancies or "problematics". They are conditions of need, deprivation, blocking, conflict and uncertainty. Five steps to address the problematics are procedural, definitional, conditional, completed, and evaluation. "Used in agenda-setting as criterion variables, the problematics and steps are what are thought about" (Edelstein 1993, p. 88). If the media and the audience look at problematics and steps in the same way, agenda-setting has occurred.

Clearly the most conscious effort on the part of the news media to set the public agenda is in the area of editorials. Nearly 100 percent of the nation's daily newspapers use editorials according to Hynds (1984). From a survey given to editors across the country, Hynds also reports that newspaper editors "agreed that their editorials do have some type of influence" on public opinion (Hynds, p. 635).

One of the most popular editorials is the endorsement of political candidates. Emig (1991) observed that "political endorsements do count and do influence voters at the polls" (p. 110).

St. Dizier (1985) studied the effects of political endorsements of candidates on voter choice. In a controlled experiment, most "voters" were given a minimal amount of information on two unknown candidates. Some groups, however, were given editorial endorsements on one of the

candidates. The groups given the endorsements favored the endorsed candidate 79 percent of the time on average.

Ratzan (1989) suggests that the real agenda-setters are stories that focus on opinion polls in political campaigns. Ratzan asserts that the 1988 presidential campaign was decided by the reporting of opinion polls. "Agendas are skewed as candidates focus on looking good in the polls instead of dealing straight with the American people on crucial policy issues" (Ratzan, p. 453).

In a content analysis of two major newspapers' front pages between October 9, 1988 and November 8, 1988, Ratzan found that approximately 45 percent of the front page stories on the campaign were opinion poll related. In the New York Times, 80 percent of the poll stories favored George Bush and in the Washington Post, 75 percent favored Bush. Ratzan concludes that the polls controlled the campaign agenda, and that the media abuses and distorts poll results and fails to focus on the real issues.

Kressel (1987) looked at the relationship between editorial opinion and public opinion over time. In a content analysis of public opinion polls and mass media coverage of the Arab/Israeli conflict, a connection was found. Between 1972 and 1982, as media coverage became more sympathetic towards the Arabs, so too did public opinion, suggesting that media coverage influenced public opinion (Kressel, 1987).

In an effort to determine how the audience reacts to the total news presentation, Krueger and Fox (1991) looked at editorials on broadcast news programs. In the broadcast setting, they found that strongly worded editorials can alienate part of the audience (1991). This might explain why broadcast outlets rarely editorialize because, unlike newspapers, television and radio audiences can tune to other sources for their news. And while newspaper readers can simply ignore the editorial page, most communities only have one newspaper, so chances are the editorial page is looked at occasionally by the paper's subscribers.

Iyengar and Simon (1993) tested the basic agenda-setting hypothesis in connection with the Persian Gulf war. A content analysis of gulf war coverage and Gallup poll data was used. The Gallup poll asked respondents to name the war, the economy, the budget deficit, drugs or crime as the nation's biggest problem. The content analysis looked at coverage and poll results from the beginning to the end of the gulf crisis.

When the gulf crisis began, coverage "absorbed virtually all the network news time" (Iyengar and Simon, p. 374). From the start of the crisis to about three months into it, the public gradually listed the Gulf as the nation's biggest problem, surpassing all other issues. Then, as hostilities subsided and coverage dropped, so did public concern. The authors also found that as the Gulf

emerged as a major problem, a sudden decline in importance was given to the issues of drugs and the budget deficit. Drugs and the budget deficit were the previous top issues of public concern.

Weaver, Zhu, and Willnat (1992) studied the influence of interpersonal communication in agenda-setting. Their study looked at agenda-setting from the personal, interpersonal and mass media levels. They hypothesize that interpersonal communication has a bridging function in influencing perceptions of issues as a personal and social problem. To study the hypothesis they used the issue of drug abuse.

The researchers first did a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the drug issue. The next step was to determine how much exposure the public received from the media on the drug issue. They then measured the public's perceptions of drug abuse as a problem on the personal and societal levels.

Weaver et al. found that personal experience with drug abuse was not a predictor of societal or personal concern but that interpersonal communication played a direct and significant role. They further concluded that mass media coverage does not contribute to perceptions of drug abuse as a problem but there was support for an indirect effect. They also conclude that the nature of the issue leads to interpersonal influence being the greatest. Their survey

data indicated that the drug issue is a very obtrusive issue. Forty-eight percent of the respondents in their survey indicated they or someone they knew had experience in combating drug abuse.

Wanta and Wu (1992) also studied the influence of interpersonal communication in the agenda-setting process. Their study investigated the intensity of the interpersonal communication as they relate to media and non-media issues. Media issues are defined as those issues given a great deal of attention by the media. Non media issues are perceived as less important because of a lack of coverage by the media. The researchers hypothesize that media coverage leads to greater salience and that interpersonal communication acts as a reinforcer of salience and sometimes an increaser of salience for non-media issues.

Via content analysis, Wanta and Wu determined that the mid-east crisis, the budget deficit, the economy, education and the environment were the top priorities of the media. The five non-media issues were determined to be drug abuse, the AIDS epidemic, terrorism, poverty/homelessness and savings and loan problems based on relatively low amounts of coverage. Opinion surveys were used to measure salience.

The researchers found a strong correlation between media coverage and salience of media issues and an even stronger correlation when interpersonal communication reinforced the media coverage. Further, interpersonal

communication "may have interfered with media agenda-setting effects by increasing the salience of non-media issues" (Wanta and Wu, p. 853). The authors conclude that the frequency of issue discussion is the best predictor of issue salience with media exposure also being important.

Cook, Tyler, Goetz, Gordon, Protess, Leff and Molotch (1983) attempted to report on the effects of media coverage on the general public's opinion and on policy makers. These authors did a pre and post test analysis of agenda-setting effects. The study was done with the cooperation of NBC news which gave researchers advanced notice of a report on home health care fraud.

Three-hundred respondents were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The experimental group was assigned to watch the investigative report, the control was told to watch something else. Pre and post test survey questions centered on the public's perceptions of home health care in general and on fraud and abuse in particular. A similar pre and post test survey was conducted on policy-makers. No instructions were given to the policy-makers to watch or not watch the program. It was felt that they would hear about it anyway.

The authors found a clear agenda-setting effect on the segment of the public that watched the program. Significant changes were found, especially in the public's perceptions of home health care fraud and abuse.

Government policy-makers were also affected by the report. Cook et al, reported that policy makers were more in agreement to the seriousness of the problem, significantly more likely to view the public as being concerned with the issue and significantly more likely to propose legislation and or policy changes designed to address the fraud and abuse problem.

Protess, Leff, Brooks and Gordon (1985) did a quasi replication of the Cook et al study using a quasi experimental pre test/post test survey method. The authors of the study called it a quasi replication because it tested newspaper agenda-setting instead of network television agenda-setting and the issue studied was different. For this study, an investigative series on rape, in the Chicago Sun Times, is looked at for its agenda-setting effects on the public, policy makers and the paper itself. Like the previous study, the researchers were given advanced notice of when the series was going to run, in order to do a pre test.

A public survey sample of 347 was selected using a random digit dialing technique. The series focused on women and suburbanites, so the sample was stratified to reflect the series. It was also stratified to reflect readers and non readers of the Sun Times. Readers of the newspaper became the treatment group and non readers were the control.

The general public and policy-makers were then asked

about their attitudes toward crime in general and rape in particular. Policy makers were also asked to assess the public's perception of these issues and their plans to initiate policies. To test agenda-setting on the paper itself, a content analysis of Sun Times rape coverage before and after the series was conducted.

The researchers found "highly limited" agenda-setting effects on Sun Times readers. "None of the questions related to the specific content of the newspaper series itself yielded a significant change of opinion or knowledge about rape or related issues" (Protess et al., p. 26). There were, however, some significant attitude changes on non-rape crime issues and increased general concern about crime.

As with the general public, the policy makers reflected minimal impact by the series. Only symbolic policy changes were proposed as a result of the rape series.

The researchers did find the most agenda-setting effects to be on the newspaper itself. Following the series, a doubling of space devoted to rape coverage was noted. More rape stories were found on the first ten pages of the paper. "The lengthy investigative process appears to have sensitized reporters and editors so that they continued to keep stories about rape on the agenda for several additional months after publication" (Protess et al., p. 34).

As for the minimal effects of agenda-setting on the public and on government policy makers, the authors conclude that newspapers don't have the agenda-setting power of the broadcast media. They allude to the "psychological impact" television has on the public and the ability to show actual, moving pictures.

Beckett (1994) was interested in finding out why crime and drugs are continually listed as the nation's biggest problem in public opinion polls, even though drug use has statistically been dropping.

To answer this question Beckett analyzed FBI crime rate statistics and a National Institute on Drug Abuse survey. Media coverage was analyzed using the Television News index for the drug case and the New York Times index for the crime case. One of his hypotheses involved initiatives by the state, saying that policy initiatives tend to drive public concern. An analysis of speeches by policy-makers was used to determine this initiative. Finally public concern was based on an analysis of Gallup poll data.

Beckett found a positive correlation among media coverage, state initiatives and levels of public concern. This would indicate existence of both media and policy-maker agenda-setting.

Wanta (1992) suggested the President of the United States has the power to dictate what the public and the press considers important. He was only able to find partial

support for this hypothesis, finding a correlation between the presidential agenda and the lead stories reported by CBS between 1970 and 1988 and ultimately with public perceptions of the importance of those issues (Wanta, 1992).

Using a time series analysis, Wanta and Foote (1994) specifically examined President George Bush's emphasis on certain issues and compared that to the media coverage of the same issues. Their intent was to find out if the president set the media's agenda or if the media set the president's agenda.

The authors studied 16 issues in four categories during the first 80 weeks of Bush's presidency. The four categories were international problems, the economy, social problems, and social issues. Presidential emphasis of issues was determined by a content analysis of The Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, which records all public statements of the president. Media coverage was determined by recording the number of stories broadcast on the three national network newscasts.

Wanta and Foote found statistically significant relationships in three of the four categories and seven of the 16 issues. These relationships tended to vary, however. In some cases, the president influenced the media, but in others, the media influenced the president. Wanta and Foote indicate that these results could vary based on the strength or perceived strength of each president that comes along,

the salience of the issue or the context of the situation.

Pritchard (1986) examines the relationship between newspaper coverage of crimes, in this case homicides, and whether prosecutors engage in plea bargaining. Pritchard hypothesizes that the more extensive the press coverage, the less likely the prosecutor is to negotiate a plea bargain in the case.

Using data from police records and a content analysis of local newspapers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Pritchard found the average length of a news story was the best predictor of prosecutor behavior (1986). "Newspapers help set the plea bargaining agendas of Milwaukee prosecutors" (Pritchard, p. 154). In other words, one big front page splash was found to be more influential on a prosecutor's plea bargaining behavior than several small articles.

How the accumulation of stories on a given topic affects agenda-setting was the focus of a study by Salwen (1988). Salwen hypothesized that public priorities will increase, peak, or level and decrease as the public agenda is drawn back in time with the media agenda. Salwen also wanted to know how long the optimum agenda-setting period was.

Using the environment as the issue of choice, the author did a content analysis of environmental stories from newspapers in the Lansing, Michigan area. To determine the public's agenda, survey data was analyzed.

With 880 of a possible 1145 people responding during three waves of surveying Salwen found no significant agenda-setting pattern in the first eight week wave. In the second wave, a 26 week pattern, still no significant pattern developed. In the third wave, a 33 week period, a significant pattern was reported. "For the most part, the correlations generally increased as the time period was extended" (Salwen, p. 105).

Eaton (1989) attempted to do a comprehensive agenda-setting study that also looked at agenda-setting over a long period of time. The author used bi-weekly, comprehensive national data from several major newspapers, magazines and the three major network newscasts to determine which issues were most important to the media. During the same stretch of time, gallup poll results were analyzed to determine the public's agenda.

Pearson correlations indicated that media content is positively correlated with issues the public finds important (1989). Another key finding was that agenda-setting was most effective immediately rather than cumulative coverage over time.

Another agenda-setting study that is somewhat issue specific was done by Yagade and Dozier (1990). Their study focuses on how agenda-setting varies when comparing concrete and abstract issues. Concrete issues were defined as issues readers can easily understand and visualize. Abstract

issues were defined as those that are harder to understand or visualize.

To test this question, the researchers determined by survey, which issues were easily understood by the public and which were not. The nuclear arms race and the budget deficit emerged as the abstract issues with energy and drug abuse being classified as concrete. The next step was to do a content analysis of Time magazine to determine media agenda. Gallup poll information was used to discover the public agenda.

Dearing (1989) suggests that media coverage tends to influence the way in which public opinion polls are conducted. For this study Dearing looks at the treatment of the AIDS issue. His basic hypothesis is that the media sets the polling agenda. The polling agenda is defined as a "ranking of various issues about which organizations that conduct surveys ask questions" (Dearing, p. 310). Dearing operationalized the polling agenda by categorizing survey questions. The media agenda was determined by categorizing the coverage of various AIDS sub themes.

Dearing found that the mass media coverage of the AIDS issue significantly influenced the number of polling questions asked about AIDS the next month. Dearing also found that when coverage of certain themes was high, there was a corresponding number of questions regarding that theme in the next month's surveys.

Carter, Stamm, and Heintz-Knowles (1992) studied why an audience would move an issue up and down on the agenda and the "consequentiality" that people have in their most salient ideas about these topics. The authors used a survey sample of 124 Washington State University students. These students were asked to give the reasons why they assigned importance to the topics on their agenda, reasons why topics should be moved up or down the agenda, how topics should be moved, and who should move them. A cognigraphic survey was also administered using word association and six relational options.

Carter et al. found that threat was the most frequent reason given for moving an issue up the agenda. Pollution and AIDs were seen by the students as being the biggest threats. Another major finding was so called "negative instrumentality" as a reason for moving up issues. In other words, issues that result in negative consequences (e.g. unemployment leads to no income,) are given high importance.

Hill (1985) studied agenda-setting by the television networks and tried to tie in the variable of viewer characteristics. "Agenda-setting is apt to occur most strongly among viewers who perceive television to be a credible source of desired information and who use television to fulfill information seeking goals" (Hill 1985, p. 342). Hill also hypothesized that exposure to news from other sources like education, newspaper and magazine reading

will enhance television agenda-setting.

Using a content analysis to determine media agenda and survey data to determine public agenda, Hill found low correlations for agenda-setting among all viewers in the study. The author attributes the lack of agenda-setting strength to the cross-sectional nature of the study, saying that longitudinal studies have had more success showing agenda-setting effects. As for the viewer characteristics determined to be the most important, prior exposure to news topics and college education appeared to have the great influence in predicting agenda-setting effects.

Watt, Mazza, and Snyder (1993) were interested in studying various types of issues for their agenda setting ability and for how long these issues remain salient to the public. The authors classified three types of issues, the novel unobtrusive, the chronic unobtrusive, and midlevel obtrusive. Their content analysis and survey analysis was done on data coming from 1979-1983. The situation in Iran was considered the novel unobtrusive issue, with the Soviet Union being the chronic unobtrusive, and inflation as the midlevel obtrusive. The authors expected the Iran issue to show the greatest correlation between accumulated coverage and salience with inflation second and the Soviet Union third, which was borne out by the data.

The data also showed that the novel unobtrusive issue showed a very quick peak of salience and an equally sudden

drop. Inflation peaked and dropped after about 1000 days and the Soviet issue showed very long accumulation time spans (1993).

Also looking at editorial effects on television audiences, Demers, Craff, Choi and Pessin (1989) studied the agenda setting effects of network news. The authors of this study found that on obtrusive issues like cost of living, energy and unemployment, there was a correlation between the amount of media coverage given an issue and the importance placed on that issue by the public (Demers et al., 1989). However when the issues were unobtrusive, such as foreign affairs, no such correlation was found. The media content analysis showed that the nuclear arms race and energy emerged as the leading media issues. Spearman rank order coefficients showed "no agenda-setting effect with the nuclear arms issue...on the other hand, the energy issue did show an agenda-setting effect" (Demers et al., p. 9). The authors conclude that because concrete issues are more easily understood, the agenda-setting effect is more likely.

Roberts (1992) attempted to determine if voting behavior can be predicted through agenda-setting. Using a three wave panel survey method, Roberts studied respondents attitudes over time during the 1990 Texas gubernatorial campaign. Media agenda was determined via a content analysis of television newscasts, newspaper coverage and political advertising.

Early in the campaign, Roberts found the public put the most importance on public education, the economy, and the budget. In the late portion of the campaign, the public's agenda varied only slightly with the economy, public education, and the budget identified as the top priorities. The media and advertising agendas were much different than the public's agenda with issues like drugs, negative advertising, and personal backgrounds topping the media agenda.

Roberts then matched voter's concerns with their voting behavior to see if issue concern was a significant predictor of voting behavior. The results indicated that 81 percent of the time, voters issue priorities correctly predicted voter outcome. Roberts also found that the media's ability to set the public's agenda was limited.

The 1984 presidential campaign was also the subject of a newspaper bias study by Merron and Gaddy (1986). One of the big issues of that campaign was the financial situation of Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro. Ferraro was painted in a bad light as a result the series of stories on her husband's financial dealings. Merron and Gaddy wanted to know if papers endorsing Mondale/Ferraro gave less play to the story than papers who did not.

In a content analysis of newspapers in Wisconsin, no bias in the coverage of Ferraro's finances was found (Merron & Gaddy, 1986). They did find some bias in the same

newspapers' coverage on the party conventions. Their findings showed significantly less coverage of the democratic national convention on the part of republican newspapers (Merron & Gaddy, 1986).

Bias is an issue when discussing agenda-setting because of the influence the media potentially has on public behavior. Brosius and Kepplinger (1992) sought to discover a link between media bias, agenda-setting and the public's behavior. The central question of this study was, how does media coverage influence voting behavior? The authors conducted a content analysis of four major German newscasts and studied public opinion polls to follow the public's party preferences.

The authors found seven areas where the media's coverage influenced the public's party preferences based on how the media covered various issues. "The results show that the agenda-setting function of the mass media is not limited to salience effects on the public's agenda" (Brosius and Kepplinger, p. 901). In other words actual voting behavior was affected by media coverage.

Another study that finds that the tone of coverage, as well as the frequency of coverage, is important was conducted by Schoenbach & Semetko (1992). This study focused on the 1990 German national and the top two issues heading into that election. The two main issues of the election were identified as the situation in the former East

Germany and the long standing concern about Germany's environment. Media coverage of both of these issues was fairly high but public salience regarding the situation in the former GDR dropped steadily as the election drew near.

The authors found that the tone of coverage regarding the former GDR, particularly in the national magazine Bild, led to the decline in salience. "An inspection of the articles revealed that during the early part of the campaign, almost all Bild stories on developments in the former GDR were laced with intensely optimistic claims and predictions of a forthcoming economic miracle in the eastern part of the country" (Schoenbach & Semetko, p. 844).

Although studies may indicate certain biases in newspaper coverage or media coverage in general, and other investigations indicate there is a level of influence the media has on public opinion, there is more research indicating that the media has minimal agenda-setting abilities.

One study that may negate the agenda-setting theory altogether is a study by Izard (1985). In a nationwide telephone survey, he found journalistic institutions rated as "average" or "only some confidence" in terms of credibility (1985). Izard suggested that his results were not indicative of a growing negative attitude toward the press but that actually "the public's negative attitude about the news media has mellowed" compared to previous

studies (p. 254). The overall negative attitude is still there and does not seem indicative of a creating a groundswell of opinion.

Whether a person trusts the media or not may depend on how important he or she thinks the issue is. Gunther (1988) found that when someone felt very strongly about an issue, his/her trust in the media coverage of that same issue was low. Those with moderate attitudes toward an issue had a higher trust level in the media's coverage. Gunther also predicted and corroborated that those with a great deal of apathy towards an issue also had a low level of trust in the media's coverage of the issue (Gunther, 1988). This suggests the notion that the public may feel the media blows things out of proportion.

Media credibility was also studied by Johnson (1993). Johnson surveyed media and non media people and compared how the two groups felt about the Iran/Contra affair. He found that most opinions regarding the affair were based on political ideology and not media coverage.

Along those same lines, Abelman (1991) looked at the news media's treatment of the Jim Baker/P.T.L. club scandal and how that coverage influenced P.T.L. membership. Members who were classified as high consumers of secular news sources were more critical of the P.T.L. club than low consumers, who remained loyal (Abelman, 1991). This too suggests that people's opinions are preconceived and not

affected by media as much as by personal ideology.

Sometimes people are affected by what they think others are thinking. Glynn (1987) hypothesized that "those who use mass communication to the exclusion of interpersonal communication will exhibit greater conservative bias than those who communicate with others frequently, regardless of media use" (p. 690). She found, however, that the media has a balancing effect, "providing information that suggests others are liberal on issues" (p. 696).

What we think others think is known as the third person effect. Gunther (1991) states the third person effect predicts that people overestimate how others are affected by media messages and that their actions are consistent with this overestimation.

Two thirds of the respondents in the Gunther study said that others would be more influenced by a news story that paints a public figure in a negative light. He also found that the source of the story may also affect opinion. He noted that a negative story on a public figure has more credibility and greater effect on readers if it comes from a credible source (Gunther, 1991).

Glynn and Ostman (1988) looked at the credibility given to public opinion stories by the public. The authors found that 75 percent of those polled agreed or strongly agreed in the general existence of public opinion but only 23 percent said they read public opinion articles (Glynn & Ostman,

1988). Despite this low number of people saying they read public opinion stories, most indicated they were influenced by others' public opinion (Glynn & Ostman, 1988).

The majority of agenda-setting studies have looked at the agenda setting effects in relation to major newspapers, national magazines and national network newscasts. Results of these studies have been mixed indicating that issue type, interpersonal communication, and personal opinion may inhibit agenda-setting in some instances and strengthen it in others. This study attempts to determine the agenda-setting effectiveness of local newspapers with smaller circulation numbers. Additionally, the issues covered in other agenda-setting studies have been fairly general in nature. This study will, in part, attempt to track the agenda-setting effects local newspapers have with specific local issues.

The first hypothesis of this study is an attempt to verify the basic agenda-setting theory, which states that the more coverage the media gives an issue, the more likely it is the public will be concerned about that issue. Stated formally:

H1: There is a positive correlation between the amount and prominence of newspaper coverage of issues in small local newspapers and the public's perceived importance of those same issues as reflected in the papers' letters to the editor section and,

H2: Local newspapers have a stronger agenda-setting effect when covering local issues specific to the community they serve as opposed to their ability to set the public's agenda for national issues.

METHOD

To test these hypotheses, a content analysis of three small to mid market size newspapers was done over a three week period. The content analyses were of the front pages and letters to the editor sections of The Pantagraph of Bloomington/Normal, Illinois, The Journal Star of Peoria, Illinois and, The Herald and Review of Decatur, Illinois. Three newspapers were chosen to see if results would be similar across the board rather than simply unique to just one community.

These three newspapers were chosen because their circulation numbers reflect the small to mid size circulation the research was aiming for and all have an open letters policy. The circulation of The Pantagraph is an estimated 56,000, The Journal Star circulation is estimated at 86,000 and The Herald and Review, has an estimated circulation of 60,000. All three papers state in their letters policies that they welcome public comments on issues. All three papers indicate they make an effort to publish all letters that come in. The Pantagraph letters policy states that copies of original letters, unsigned

letters and letters without an address or phone are not accepted. The Journal Star readers are encouraged to type letters and limit their comments to one page. Only The Herald and Review clearly spells out what will not be published by stating, "Letters of limited interest, libelous or in poor taste will not be published." The researcher called all three editorial departments to get further clarification of their policies and found that all letters are published unless they are libelous or appear to be a personal vendetta. For example, when a writer encourages readers to stop patronizing businesses because they give poor service. In such cases, editorial editors say they have no way of knowing if the letters are based in fact or in the writers' imagination.

In order to determine the newspapers' agendas, a content analysis was done. Because prominence of coverage was one of the variables in the first hypothesis, only the front page articles were measured for their amount of coverage on particular issues. All three newspapers were analyzed over a three week period beginning with April 9, 1995 and ending on April 29 1995.

Each front page story was logged by date, headline, issue type (national or local) and column inch total. If the headline didn't automatically give the researcher a sense for what the story was about, a short summary was written in the headline section of the log. Issues were

determined to be either local or national/international in scope. Stories logged as local were considered to be specific to the community, region and state that the paper served. Local stories were also those that put a local spin on a national issue. For example, a story that focused on a local citizen's worries about welfare reform (a national issue) was logged as local. Stories logged as national were any story that dealt with a national/international issue and did not contain any local angle. The content of each article was measured by length and width of column inches devoted to each story. If stories were continued on another page of the newspaper, the continuation was also measured. The length times the width of the column inches was recorded for each story in each of the three papers. The size of the characters were uniform. In other words, all the articles used the same size type for the content of the story.

Similarly, the public's agenda was measured via a content analysis of the newspapers' letters to the editor section. This is not a method that has been used by other researchers. Some have done their own public opinion surveys and others have analyzed national survey data. By measuring the content of the letters to the editor sections of these three newspapers, a researcher is able to determine the public's agenda without having to worry about response bias on the part of the subjects, because they are unaware that their communication of opinion is being measured.

As was the case with the front page articles, letters were logged daily by the date they appeared, the headlines of the letters (or short explanations of content), whether it was a national or local issue, and the column inches devoted to the subject. Once again, column inches were determined by the length times the width of the individual letters. Size of the characters were the same in all cases.

Editorial departments indicated a three to four day lag period existed between the time an article appears in the paper and the first date a letter in response to that article appears. For this reason, the researcher logged only front page articles between the dates of April 9 and April 11. From April 12 through April 25, both front page articles and letters to the editor were logged. Finally, from April 26 through April 29, only the letters to the editor were logged. This was done to try and account for the lag time between the date the article appeared and the publication of reader responses to that article or issue.

The next step in the process was to group each front page article by issue category. Issue categories were determined individually for each of the three newspapers according to the content of the newspapers' articles. Articles were scanned for their basic themes and then placed in a category. For example, a story about a bank robbery would go into the crime category. A story about action taken by the city council or county board would go into a

"local government" issue category. Sometimes a story with several follow-up articles would get a category of its own. This was the case for the bombing incident in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Because of the amount of coverage that story was given, it was considered as an issue category all on its own.

Again, in a similar fashion, letters to the editor were also scanned for basic themes and placed in an issue category. Both letters and articles were placed in categories and logged by the amount of coverage they were given.

Once the articles and letters were logged by issue category the issue categories were ranked to determine the media and the public agendas. The number of column inches in each issue category was totaled up to determine how much coverage the media gave to the specific issue. Letters were also totaled by column inch per issue category to determine the public agenda.

Once the totals for each issue in each paper were added up, the issues were ranked by amount of column inch space they took up. For example, if issue "a" received 100 inches of column space over the sampling period and issue "b" received 90 inches, issue "a" ranked ahead of issue "b". Letters to the editor were ranked in a similar fashion.

Issue categories were identified in both the media and public agendas based on their local versus national scope.

Issue categories were labeled as predominantly local and predominantly national. This was done in order to test hypothesis two.

Because of the difference in article length versus letters to the editor length, a relative ranking was assigned to each issue category. The relative rankings were based on the percentage of the total agenda each issue category comprised. This was done in order to employ the Pearson product-moment correlation to test for significant, positive correlations between media coverage and the number letters to the editor the media coverage generated. Correlations were done on the national issue categories, the local issue categories and on each issue individually.

Results

A total of 246 stories were content analyzed from the front pages of the three newspapers used for this study. The Pantagraph carried a total of 100 stories during the sampling period. The Herald and Review ran a total of 76 stories. The Journal Star carried a total of 70 front pages stories between the April 9 through April 25 sampling period.

A total of 223 letters to the editor were categorized from the letters to the editor sections of the three newspapers. A total of 97 came from the pages of The Pantagraph. The Journal Star carried a total of 62 letters

to the editor. In The Herald and Review a total of 64 letters to the editor were reviewed for their content.

In all three newspapers the lead, front page agenda item for the sampling period was the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, which occurred on April 19. Crime, international issues, business news, welfare, Illinois State University, natural disasters, politics, local government, and recreation were the top ten issues in The Pantagraph. In all 22 issue categories were determined for the 100 stories in The Pantagraph. The following table lists all 22 issues by order of front page coverage. The number at the left of the page is the rank of that issue. The number at the right is the total number of column inches The Pantagraph devoted to that issue:

The Pantagraph

Issues	Column Inches
1. Oklahoma City bombing	657.125
2. Crime	314.5
3. International Issues	287.875
4. Business News	269.125
5. Welfare	217.125
6. Illinois State University	165.75
7. Natural Disasters	125.375
8. Politics	123.5
9. Local Government	119.875
10. Recreation	100.5
11. Affirmative Action	96.5
12. Taxes	89.75
13. Agriculture	77.5
14. Education	76.75
15. Environment	74.75
16. Health care	72.00
17. Social Security	70.00
18. Women's Issues	58.25
19. Viet Nam	46.875

20. State Politics	43.5
21. Religion	40.00
22. Obituaries	31.5

In The Pantagraph letters to the editor section, Illinois State University, education, welfare, national politics, gun control issues, morality, and business were among the top issues. The table on the following page lists all 23 issues in rank order by column inch:

Letters to the Editor in The Pantagraph

Issues	Column Inches
1. Illinois State University	175.5
2. Education	138.94
3. Welfare	87.75
4. Politics	83.25
5. Gun Issues	76.5
6. Morality	68.625
7. Business News	59.5
8. Religion	52.875
9. Women's issues	51.75
10. State Politics	49.5
11. Crime	46.125
12. Health care	36.56
13. Labor	33.75
14. Environment	30.375
15. Oklahoma City Bombing	24.75
16. Obituaries	22.5
17. Agriculture	21.375
18. International Issues	21.375
19. Native American Rights	21.375
20. Local Government	16.875
21. Patriotism	15.75
22. Recreation	13.5
23. Taxes	11.25

When the two sets of issues were combined and correlated, no significance was found. The following table shows the media and letters to the editor coverage of the issues listed above. The combined list consists of 27

issues. The number attributed to media and letters coverage represents the percentage score of the particular issue against the total agendas.

Pantagraph versus Letters to the Editor Agenda

Issue	Media Coverage	Letters Coverage
1. Oklahoma City	20.8	2.2
2. Crime	10.0	1.5
3. International Issues	9.1	1.9
4. Business News	8.5	5.2
5. Welfare	6.9	7.7
6. Illinois State U.	5.2	15.3
7. Disasters	4.0	0.0
8. National Politics	3.9	7.3
9. Local Government	3.8	1.5
10. Recreation	3.2	1.2
11. Affirmative Action	3.1	0.0
12. Taxes	2.8	0.0
13. Agriculture	2.5	1.9
14. Education	2.4	12.1
15. Environment	2.4	2.6
16. Health care	2.3	3.2
17. Social Security	2.2	0.0
18. Women's Issues	1.8	4.5
19. Viet Nam	1.5	0.0
20. State Politics	1.4	4.3
21. Religion	1.3	4.6
22. Obituaries	1.0	2.0
23. Patriotism	0.0	1.4
24. Gun Issues	0.0	6.7
25. Morality	0.0	6.0
26. Labor	0.0	2.9
27. Native American Rights	0.0	1.5

A Pearson product moment correlation of .057 was calculated for this group of data. The critical value for significance at the .10 level is .32 with 25 degrees of freedom. So for The Pantagraph, Hypothesis number one was not confirmed.

Next the national versus local issue comparison was made for The Pantagraph. Oklahoma City, International

issues, politics, affirmative action, social security, Viet Nam, obituaries, religion, and the environment were isolated as "national" issues. The Pearson correlation for this set of issues was -.008, well short of the critical value of .582. The remaining 19 issues fell into the local category. The correlation coefficient for local issues was .227. Although that score is short of the critical value of .389 for a significant correlation, it is higher than the correlation coefficient of the national issues. This would indicate at least partial confirmation of hypothesis two.

Further, twelve issues were pulled from the list because they appeared on the surface to be closely correlated. The list appears below.

Closely Correlated Pantagraph Issues

Issue	Media Coverage	Letters Coverage
1. Welfare	6.9	7.7
2. Agriculture	2.5	1.9
3. Environment	2.4	2.6
4. Health care	2.3	3.2
5. Obituaries	1.0	2.0
6. Business News	8.5	5.2
7. Local Government	3.8	1.5
8. Recreation	3.2	1.2
9. Taxes	2.8	1.0
10. Women's Issues	1.8	4.5
11. State Politics	1.4	4.3
12. Religion	1.3	4.6

The correlation coefficient for this set of issues was .571, significant at the .10 level. Of this set of 12 significantly correlated issues, 11 of them are local. This provides further support for hypothesis two.

In the Journal Star of Peoria, crime, international issues, agriculture, business news, health care, taxes, welfare, environment, and national politics followed the Oklahoma City bombing as the top issues in the sampling period. On the letters side, the top issues were labor, local government, animal rights, health care, welfare, national politics, Oklahoma City, Viet Nam, religion, and education.

The table on the following page indicates how all the issues were covered by the media and the public in The Journal Star:

Journal Star versus Letters to the Editor Agenda

Issue	Media Coverage	Letters Coverage
1. Oklahoma City	23.6	5.6
2. Crime	9.6	5.1
3. International Issues	7.6	0.0
4. Agriculture	7.1	0.0
5. Business News	6.2	0.0
6. Health care	6.0	7.9
7. Taxes	5.6	2.6
8. Welfare	5.2	7.0
9. Environment	3.6	2.5
10. National Politics	3.0	6.2
11. Local Government	2.8	10.9
12. Weather	2.8	0.0
13. Youth	2.1	0.0
14. Viet Nam	1.9	5.3
15. Guns	1.8	4.9
16. O. J. Simpson	1.8	0.0
17. Alcohol	1.7	0.0
18. Religion	1.6	5.1
19. Social Security	1.6	0.0
20. Affirmative Action	1.1	3.4
21. Education	1.1	5.1
22. Women's Issues	1.1	0.0
23. World War II	.08	.08
24. Labor	0.0	14.4
25. Animal Rights	0.0	8.1

26. Abortion	0.0	3.0
27. Baseball	0.0	2.4

All 27 Journal Star issues achieved a correlation coefficient of .026. The critical value for significance at the .10 level is .323 with 25 degrees of freedom. As was the case with The Pantagraph, the first hypothesis is not supported.

Fourteen of the 27 issues were categorized as national in nature. This group's correlation coefficient was .374, short of the critical value of .457 for a .10 significant correlation. Unlike The Pantagraph, however, the national issues correlated higher than local issues. The local issue correlation coefficient was -.39 in The Journal Star. Therefore, from The Journal Star perspective, there is no support for hypothesis two.

Additionally, only seven issues were closely correlated between the front page and the letters to the editor in The Journal Star. They appear below:

Closely Correlated Journal Star Issues

Issue	Media Coverage	Letters Coverage
1. Health care	6.0	7.9
2. Welfare	5.2	7.0
3. Environment	3.6	2.5
4. National Politics	3.0	6.2
5. Guns	1.8	4.9
6. Affirmative Action	1.1	3.4
7. World War II	.08	.08

This set of issues was highly and significantly correlated. The correlation coefficient was .818, significant at the .05 level. Agenda-setting among the

significantly correlated issues was slightly stronger with national issues in The Journal Star. Four of these seven issues were national in nature. This presents further contention with hypothesis two.

In The Herald and Review of Decatur, following the Oklahoma City Bombing, crime, state politics, features, local government, education, environment, taxes, health care, and labor were the top issues. The letters to the editor top issues included labor, animal rights, local government, education, other issues (thank you letters, don't miss the annual bake sale etc), politics, drinking, gun issues, crime, and state politics.

The following table shows how all the issues were covered by the paper and those writing to the editor:

Herald and Review versus Letters to the Editor Agenda

Issue	Media Coverage	Letters Coverage
1. Bombing	18.8	0.0
2. Crime	14.5	2.6
3. State Politics	10.6	2.6
4. Features/Other	9.0	5.5
5. Local Government	6.1	12.6
6. Education	5.5	8.9
7. Environment	4.9	2.3
8. Taxes	3.4	.09
9. Health care	3.4	1.9
10. Labor	3.3	22.7
11. Alcohol	3.1	4.5
12. Viet Nam	2.4	0.0
13. Sports	2.2	.07
14. Gambling	2.1	0.0
15. Religion	1.9	0.0
16. Women's Issues	1.8	0.0
17. Welfare	1.6	2.3
18. Children	1.6	2.1
19. Recreation	1.5	0.0
20. Guns	1.1	2.9

21. Business News	.06	2.3
22. Disasters	.05	0.0
23. Animal Rights	0.0	15.0
24. National Politics	0.0	4.5
25. Abortion	0.0	2.1
26. Social Security	0.0	1.1

When all the issues were correlated, a slight negative correlation was found for the issues in The Herald and Review. The correlation coefficient was -.004. The critical value for .10 significance is .323. All three newspapers fail to support the basic agenda-setting theory in the framework of this study.

The negative correlation for all issues combined appears to be the result of the even more negative correlation when looking at the national issues only. The bombing, Viet Nam, religion, children, business news, national politics, abortion, and social security were all categorized as national based on their content. The correlation coefficient for these eight issues was -.46. The critical value for a .10 significant correlation is .621.

Local issues did show a higher correlation than national issues although they were not significantly correlated either. The local issues in The Herald and Review achieved a .085 correlation coefficient. The critical value for significant correlation at the .10 level is .400. The higher correlation, as compared to the national issues, does give partial support to hypothesis two.

Six issues pulled from The Herald and Review front page and letters agendas did correlate significantly. The issues and their relative coverages are shown in the table below.

Closely Correlated Herald and Review Issues

Issue	Media Coverage	Letters Coverage
1. Education	5.5	8.9
2. Health	3.4	1.9
3. Alcohol	3.1	4.5
4. Welfare	1.6	2.3
5. Children	1.6	2.1
6. Guns	1.1	2.9

The above six issues' correlation coefficient is .821, significant at the .05 level. Of these six issues, five were framed as local issues. This further supports hypothesis number two.

Discussion

The results of this study appear to indicate no significant correlation between front page coverage and what the public writes about in the letters to the editor section. The basic agenda-setting theory states that the more coverage an issue gets, the more the public will think about that issue. It is apparent, however, that thinking about an issue may or may not extend to writing about an issue. Writing takes time and effort that people may not feel that they have. There may also be some kind of phobia about writing, similar to speech anxiety, that makes people afraid to express their views in writing and be held up to public scrutiny.

There was evidence of some type of agenda setting as the letters to the editor were surveyed for content, albeit not front page agenda-setting. Letters would refer to articles in other sections of the newspaper, editorial opinions held by the paper's editorial staffs and other letters that previously appeared in the letters section.

People who write to the editor of newspapers also appear, to some extent, to be forwarding their own agendas. Even when you dismiss the letters that come from writers with an apparent axe to grind, the letters section was also a forum for the head of the Illinois State Police (gun issues), local and state union leaders (labor issues), mayors and city council representatives, and the Macon County Sheriff (who was writing in response to public outcry about sheriff's deputies shooting and killing wild animals).

To say that no agenda-setting exists may be a little unfair. For example, the animal rights issue that was so prevalent in The Herald and Review, was the result of one front page photo. The photo depicted a dead "wolf like" creature that was reportedly wreaking havoc on rural Decatur residents. Sheriff's deputies had shot the animal, and their action prompted a large volume of letters during the testing period. Letters on both sides of the animal rights issue accounted for 15 percent of The Herald and Review's letters to the editor agenda.

This study also showed that some issues were

significantly correlated. It should be noted that most of these issues were relatively low on both agendas. In other words, issues that ranked high on the front page agenda would rank low on the letters to the editor agenda and issues high on the letters agenda were low on the front page agenda. Only those issues relatively low on both agendas were significantly correlated.

Overall there was support for the second hypothesis. With the exception of The Journal Star, issues that were significantly correlated were local in nature and local issues showed greater correlation than national issues. This might go along with previous research that shows greater obtrusiveness and issue salience leads to stronger agenda-setting. Issues that are difficult to understand or that don't have a direct impact on people tend to fall lower on their personal agendas. Local issues, at least the ones that appeared on the front pages of the newspapers in this study, seemed to have a great deal of direct impact on the audience. Issues like tax increases, education, and gun issues all seemed to generate letters. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of letters to the editor dealt with local issues.

There are some limitations with this study. By doing a content analysis of letters to the editor instead of surveying the various publics, a true picture of agenda-setting may not be achieved. There are pros and cons to

both methods. Through content analysis, an unbiased picture can be obtained, but, as mentioned earlier, thinking about an issue doesn't always translate to writing about it.

Another possible limitation is the lag time between the day an issue appeared on the front page and the day the issue was talked about in letters to the editor. There was some evidence that this lag time was longer than the three to four days the editorial editors said was the norm. Potentially, therefore, an issue like the Oklahoma City bombing, which occurred towards the end of the sampling period, could have generated more letters in the days or weeks following the sampling period.

The Oklahoma City issue itself could have been a limitation. Had the bombing not occurred, a more even distribution of issue coverage would have been likely with more time devoted to other issues.

It might also be helpful to do a content analysis of the entire front section or multiple sections of a newspaper in the future, to get a more accurate picture of the newspaper's agenda. The nature of the front page is to give readers a "just the facts" approach. Other sections which include editorials or columnist commentary might generate more thought about certain issues and more letters.

Future research should also determine a total media agenda by analyzing the content of local television and radio newscasts. The public agenda may be set by a number

of different sources of which the front page is only one. This research, however, indicates little relationship between front page agenda and letters to the editor and only partial support for the hypothesis that "local" newspapers are better at setting the local agenda than they are the national agenda.

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